

26.8.9 “The Prodigal Effect” - Rev. Dr. Adam Hange, Hillsboro UCC

I never imagined that part of my work, as a pastor, would involve deciding if Narcan belonged in our First Aid kit. For years, our kits contained bandages, antiseptic wipes, maybe some aspirin. Things for scraped knees and headaches. But then, one day, I learned that someone had an overdose just outside our building. Just a few yards from where we gather to sing hymns and share prayer requests on Sundays. I talked about it with key staff. We didn't debate it for long. We decided to add Narcan to our First Aid kits in both buildings.

If the name Narcan is unfamiliar to you, it is the brand name for naloxone nasal spray—a powerful medicine that can reverse the effects of opioids, like fentanyl. Many overdoses happen to people who don't even know they've taken fentanyl; they think they're taking some other drug—meth or cocaine. They are unaware of their risk. And in those moments, Narcan isn't just medicine. It is time. It is breath. It is the difference between a funeral... and a future. But putting that box on the wall next to the AED wasn't just an administrative decision. It was also a theological one.

Because, in doing this, we are making a statement about what we believe grace looks like. It is us answering the question: Do we wait for someone to be "clean" before we love them? Or do we love them enough... to keep them breathing while they are still “lost?”

I have been pastoring in one form or another for over twenty years. In that time, I have seen what seemed like miracles. Stories about recovery and redemption. I've heard testimonies of healing, where someone says, "I was lost, but now I'm found; blind, but now I see."

I remember a young man from one of my first youth groups who started using drugs, then more dangerous and deadly ones. One day he overdosed and had a near-death experience. After several years of recovery and relapse, he went to rehab, and this time it “stuck.” He's spent the last 15 years turning his trauma into fuel for his art. Now others, reading his words, find solace and understanding. That story brings me hope. I am so proud of that young person and their journey. But I also carry other stories.

I remember a young woman who experienced profound trauma early in her life. Her family was not well-off. Despite a teenage pregnancy, she finished school and began to build a life — she had a husband, two children, a home, a job. But, in the end, she couldn't shake the weight of all her accumulated trauma.

One day, her ex-husband called to tell me she wasn't well, and he was worried. The next week, he called again to say she had overdosed. Her friends and family were grieving, but honestly? They weren't surprised. They knew her struggles. They knew the pain she had carried for so long. They had worried all along... that it was only a matter of time.

And, I know parents, some in their seventies and eighties, who wake up every morning worrying about their adult children. They are afraid of phone calls at odd times of day and night, because they don't know if the next call will be from the police, the hospital, or the morgue. Many are at their wits' end. They don't know how to love their child anymore. Some have asked me different versions of the same questions: "Pastor, what does Love look like in this situation? What is enabling? Where is the line between helping and hurting?"

And, I know children who have been disowned by parents and families, because they couldn't or wouldn't stop using. And siblings who wish their families would set different boundaries—who wish parents would practice more "tough love." I was to ask for a show of hands... and ask "How many of us here today have someone in our lives with a substance use disorder?" How many hands do you think you would see? Many, if not most, I'd guess.

How many of us know that the story of recovery is complex? How many of us know that it doesn't end neatly? How many of us know that "recovery" isn't a straight line from bad to good, but a winding road full of setbacks, small victories, relapses, and quiet, everyday courage? We live in a world that loves simple—easy to understand—stories. We love the hero's journey. The Departure. Trial. Return. And finally, the Triumph. (Look to the movie *The Odyssey*, for instance).

And so, we turn to the Bible, expecting to read just such a story. And we go to the story we think we already know, sometimes called "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." Luke 15. It's actually the last of three stories Jesus tells about things that have been lost... and found.

It reads almost like a fairy tale. A man has two sons. The younger son asks for his inheritance early—which, in that culture, was essentially saying, "I wish you were dead so I could have all your money." He takes it. He goes away. He squanders everything in "dissolute living." When he's spent it all, he finds himself in a filthy pig sty, and realizes, he's finally hits "rock bottom." He rehearses a speech. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."

He returns. Do you think he was sober? Do you think he was fixed? Transformed? Or just broken. Hungry and Ashamed?

And then there is a moment we sometimes skip over in our rush to the welcome home party. Verse 20 says: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

While he was still a long way off. Do you notice the father in this story didn't wait to hear his rehearsed speech? He didn't wait for him to make a confession. He didn't wait for proof of sobriety. He didn't wait for the son to get a job, or join a support group, or promise never to "get with the program." He saw him coming - a long way off - and he ran to him!

Maybe you've heard it before—but in first-century Jewish culture, a patriarch did not run. Running exposed the legs beneath the robe; it was undignified. It was shameful. But this father shames himself to save his son. He runs toward the smell of the pig pen, and poverty, and shame. Why? Because he knows something we often forget. After all his midnight worrying, he now knows... his son is alive!

"Bring the best robe," the father says. "Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us celebrate!"

Notice what the father does not say. He does not say, "First, you will attend twelve meetings. Then, you will submit to random drug tests. Then, you will make restitution for the money you stole. And only then, perhaps, will we throw a party."

That is not the father's logic. That is our logic of what is fair, and right, and wise. Scholars like Caralyn Ware, who studies theology and medicine, have pointed out that many Christian communities suffer from what she calls "The Prodigal Effect." She says, in practice, too often, Christian communities treat grace like a transaction. We say a lot about Amazing Grace, but we act in ways that say our care... is conditional...

We think, "We will love you, support you, and welcome you back—but only after you achieve a radical transformation. Only after you get 'clean and sober.' Only after you prove you've changed."

But that's not everyone's story, is it? Too often, we frame "Relapse" as a personal failure. Or worse, as a moral failure. If you slip up, we think, "Don't help them anymore. They took advantage of our generosity once, they'll just do it again." We feel resentful. We feel used. We want to be a part of your recovery story—so long as it has a successful outcome! Because then we can take a little credit for it. Then it fits into our "Amazing Grace" narrative. But when we do this, we confuse grace with a kind of ministry investment strategy.

This is the trap of the older brother. Listen to what he says in verse 29: "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends."

The older brother isn't evil. He's just tired, and a little bitter. Maybe he's suffering from "compassion fatigue." Maybe he's seen this story too many times to be convinced his brother's repentance is genuine.

At the end of the day, he believes that Love is earned through obedience. He believes that because he stayed home, followed the rules, and worked hard, he deserves the special treatment. And because his brother broke the rules, he deserves punishment, or at least, accountability. He deserves a cold shoulder, more than a celebration.

Maybe he just doesn't want his father or family to be "taken advantage of" again. Sound familiar? How many times have we said to someone we know, struggling with addiction, "We supported you through rehab. We paid for the program. We prayed for you. Why are you using again? You owe us better than this." When we say that, we are standing in the field with the older brother. We are judging the father's heart. We are demanding that God operate on a ledger of debts and credits. And missing the matrix of other factors that contribute to an individual's healing and wholeness.

Harm reduction teaches us, a different and important truth. Harm reduction is not about enabling sin. It is about recognizing that death is not a moral lesson. Death is just death. Harm reduction teaches us to meet people where they are. Not where we wish they were. Give them Narcan. Offer clean needles. Sit with them in withdrawal. Listen without demanding testimony first. Provide housing, even if they aren't "ready." Connect them to mental health resources. Surround them with a network of support. Whatever their situation. Reduce the harm. Preserve their dignity. Keep them alive. Because every small step away from death... is sacred.

I don't know about you, but I don't think I ever looked at this story that way before. I always assumed the younger son was finally clean and sober. But the father throws the party before his youngest son is fixed. He celebrates the return, not the perfection. He values the relationship more than the hoped-for result.

So, what does this mean for us? For our church, on this Harm Reduction Sunday? I believe it is an invitation to unlearn the idea that holiness looks like cleanliness. And understand, instead,

that holiness looks like compassion. It means we stop asking, "Have you gotten clean?" and start asking, "Are you safe? Are you fed? Do you know you are loved?"

It means we understand that addiction is not a moral failing. It is a complex interplay of biology, trauma, genetics, and systemic inequality. As harm reduction scholars remind us, there are serious gaps in healthcare. There are systems of neglect and abuse. There are people who have tried to quit ten times and failed nine. Does the ninth failure cancel out the tenth chance? No. I'm so proud that the UCC has a national team dedicated to teaching about harm reduction. They advocate for policies that save lives. They remind us that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners—not after they got their lives in order, but while they were still finding their way. Jesus didn't wait for the lepers to heal before he touched them. He touched them, and they were healed.

Our task is not to judge the timeline of someone's recovery. Our call is to keep the door open. To keep the table set. To believe—even when they don't—that they are beloved. Maybe some prodigals don't come home tonight. Maybe they come tomorrow. Maybe they need ten chances. Maybe they never fully "get it together" in the way we define it. As long as they are breathing, they are worth running toward. That is the message of good news I want to share today.

I hope I'll never have to use that Narcan in our First Aid kit. I hope I only replace it because it's expired. But if it's ever needed—if someone collapses outside these doors, or inside them—I want us to be prepared. Not just with medicine, but with our presence, care, and support. I hope I'll never have to pray with a parent after their child nearly loses their life to an overdose. But if I do, I want to be able to sit with them in that terror, without offering platitudes. Without blaming. Just holding space for their grief and their fierce, stubborn love

People who use drugs are beloved of God. People recovering from addiction are beloved of God. Parents, and siblings, and partners, watching from the sidelines are beloved of God. Even the tired, resentful older brothers among us—we are all beloved.

There is no single story. Each story is unique. Every prodigal is someone's child. Every setback is a cry for help. Every survival is a miracle. Let us be a church that runs toward the broken. Not away from the messy. Let us measure our success not in sobriety certificates, but in lives held close. Amen.